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DIRECTORATE OF
INTELLIGENCE

Intelligence Memorandum

*The Consequences of a Halt in the Bombardment
of North Vietnam*

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CENTRAL INTELLIGENCE AGENCY
Directorate of Intelligence
9 October 1967

INTELLIGENCE MEMORANDUM

The Consequences of a Halt in the
Bombardment of North Vietnam

Summary

If the United States were to halt the bombardment of North Vietnam, and avoided saying that it was setting a time limit on the halt, Hanoi would probably be willing to enter direct talks. It would almost certainly take a cessation of longer than a month to elicit such a response, and none would be forthcoming at all if a reciprocal gesture of de-escalation were demanded.

Hanoi makes a distinction between talks, private, tentative, and exploratory, and negotiations, the formal settlement of outstanding issues. Thus its initial response would be cautious, and would be intended at the most to open the way to "talks." The opening of "negotiations" would depend on whether the US position, as revealed in these private conversations, was sufficiently forthcoming to give Hanoi hope of eventually achieving its goals in South Vietnam.

The North Vietnamese would see a cessation of bombardment without a reciprocal gesture on their part as a sign the US will was weakening, and would be greatly encouraged to believe that the course they had been following was correct. On the other hand, they would be highly suspicious of US intent, particularly in the context of the election of 1968. They would fear that the pattern of 1954 would be repeated, that the great powers might somehow deprive them of the fruits of victory. And they would expect to feel intensified and conflicting pressures from Moscow and Peking.

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These factors would tend to strengthen Hanoi's determination to press for significant concessions from the US. Thus the outlook for the talks developing into more serious negotiations would be poor, unless the US was willing to accept terms it has hitherto ruled out. Nevertheless, the North Vietnamese would seek to prolong the talks, because they would probably believe the political pressures for US concessions would be greater than the corresponding pressures on them. They would expect that a continued erosion of the US negotiating position, combined with continued military attrition in the South, would eventually bring the US to accept a formula for settlement favorable to Hanoi's basic aims.

To this end, Hanoi would take advantage of any halt in bombardment to improve its military capabilities. It would move to restore and harden its transportation and industry in the North, and strengthen and reorganize its logistic routes to the South. A cessation of a week would enable the North Vietnamese to mount a stockpiling effort on the scale of their operations during the Tet pause of 1967; this would only yield them a short-term tactical advantage. For any longer period their gains would be proportionally larger. By the end of a year they would have been able to set their house thoroughly in order and to make themselves much less vulnerable to any future attacks. Although the bombing of the North has not been the limiting factor on the scale of their operations in the South, they could, if they chose, provide substantial reinforcements for their forces there with less risk and disruption than they now suffer.

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General Considerations

1. The leaders of North Vietnam now assume that the war will end in a negotiation of some sort. They know that they cannot win militarily, but they continue to believe that the US cannot do so either. They do not think that what they see as a military stalemate requires negotiation of a "compromise." They think that the real issue of the war--who holds power in South Vietnam--cannot be compromised. They expect that in the end the Americans will recognize that they cannot bring about a political-military situation in the South permitting them to impose their own terms, and will therefore grow weary of their exertions. At this point a negotiation would become possible. This would be a negotiation whose outcome, Hanoi would expect, would permit it sooner or later to achieve its objectives in the South. In short, Hanoi will not negotiate merely to restore peace, but only to advance its political aims.

2. This set of mind would determine Hanoi's response to a cessation of attacks on North Vietnam. The leaders there would ask themselves whether this development meant that the American attitude toward a settlement was changing. If they were told, or inferred from seemingly inspired press comment, that the halt in attacks was for one week, or even one month, they would conclude that the US was not ready for "serious" negotiations. They would believe that another such "pause" was an effort to pressure them into a negotiation on unfavorable terms, or was the prelude to a new escalation. In their minds, a pledge by the US to halt the bombing "permanently" is sought as an indication that the US is ready to entertain terms for a settlement which would be at least a step toward achievement of their war aims. They might view a US commitment to suspend attacks for a year as something approaching a permanent halt, because they would know that the US would find it extremely difficult for political reasons to resume.

3. The leaders in Hanoi are convinced that in the end the United States, like France, will succumb to a combination of political stonewalling and military attrition. They are aware that large sections

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of international opinion and some elements of the US domestic political spectrum believe that the US is engaged in a war it cannot win. They are aware of the intense pressures on the US, first, for a cessation of bombing, second for a US recognition of the National Liberation Front, and finally for a US withdrawal from South Vietnam. Thus Hanoi would see a US willingness to halt the bombing without a reciprocal gesture as a sign that the US was beginning to yield and would be correspondingly reinforced in its conviction that its course had been correct.

4. At the same time they would view a US concession with deep suspicion. As the election of 1968 approached, they would be increasingly tempted to see any such move as a political trick designed to win the election. If aerial reconnaissance on North Vietnam is maintained, and if bombing in Laos continues, they might argue that the US had not "unconditionally" ceased its attacks. Above all, they would be afraid that the history of 1954 would repeat itself. They would envisage themselves trapped in talks from which world opinion would not let them escape, and in which the great powers would deprive them of the fruits of victory. They would also have to assess the potential pressures from Moscow and Peking for and against a settlement.

5. In the end, Hanoi would probably come to believe that entering exploratory talks with the US was in its interest. In the subsequent paragraphs, this paper examines probable North Vietnamese moves, first in the political and then in the military and logistic field, during the period in which bombardment was halted. In so doing it assumes that the US, whatever diplomatic initiatives it undertakes, would do nothing that contradicted the impression that the halt was of indefinite duration.

The Political Play

6. No positive response would be likely from Hanoi after only one week. The North Vietnamese would need more time both to assess US intentions and to plan their own moves. Indeed, any positive political reaction by Hanoi to a cessation of attacks would be unlikely until at least a month has passed. This response could hardly be more prompt

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unless the US also conveyed something promising about the ultimate terms of negotiation. The North Vietnamese might think that on grounds of face the cessation had to continue longer than the earlier pause of 37 days.

7. Hanoi would, by this time, have come under considerable pressure, from free world and probably Soviet bloc countries, to agree to talks. Hanoi's public posture would be ambiguous at first, though it would be probing actively through third parties to get a fix on US intentions. When the North Vietnamese finally agreed to direct talks, it would probably be on condition that these be shielded as much as possible from publicity. They would fear that a theatrical encounter would put them under international pressure that would limit their maneuverability. In short, they would want the first move to the table to be for a private, exploratory phase.

8. Hanoi would probably be unwilling to scale down hostilities during this phase, and would almost certainly be unwilling to halt them. It would, however, be looking over the American delegation's shoulder at the political situation in the United States. If the talks extended into the election campaign of 1968 the North Vietnamese would make tactical modifications of their position to exploit whatever opportunities may be offered them in the course of the campaign.

9. They would nevertheless not deviate from their primary purpose, to establish whether the US was prepared to move toward a political settlement which would permit eventual achievement of Hanoi's aims in the South. The heart of such a settlement would be the role assigned to the National Liberation Front. They would insist that, whatever the transitional steps, the fix should be in, that is, that the National Liberation Front would emerge as the dominant political force in the South. A firm schedule for US military withdrawal would probably be demanded as an earnest of the US commitment to the essential political bargain. They would not be willing to discuss cease-fire arrangements seriously--or enter formal and public negotiations--until this basic point was settled to their satisfaction.

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Military and Logistic Factors

10. Regardless of its political response, Hanoi would certainly use a bombing pause of any duration to improve its military and economic posture. It would seek to translate these improvements into increased military capabilities in the South. Concerned that the US would couple its diplomatic initiative with an intensification of military pressures in the South, it would seek to maintain at least its present strength in the South relative to that of the US. The North Vietnamese would want not only to prevent a weakening of their negotiating hand, but also to continue the erosion of American public opinion by holding their own in a war of attrition.

11. Within a week after bombing stopped the North Vietnamese could certainly duplicate the build-up of stockpiles carried on during the 4-day Tet bombing pause in February 1967, when an estimated 15,000-20,000 tons of supplies were moved into the southern part of North Vietnam. A considerable part of these supplies could be moved into Laos. During one day of Tet, for example, over 800 tons of supplies were trucked through the Mu Gia Pass route alone. The movement of 15,000-20,000 tons of supplies would be more than adequate to satisfy for 30 days the essential requirements for the civilian and military elements in the southern half of North Vietnam as well as for the Communist forces in Laos, the DMZ area, and South Vietnam.

12. During a brief bombing pause, North Vietnamese would not attempt much in the way of permanent repair to bomb-damaged facilities. They would, however, try to restore lines of communications closer to normal capacities by completing temporary repairs to road and rail beds and would make some progress in repairing key transportation targets such as bridges.

13. With resupply efforts on the Tet scale the North Vietnamese by the end of a month would have been able to move and preposition a 3-4 months' stockpile of essential military and economic goods. They would also have made substantial progress in relieving other bad situations, for example, the congestion and accumulation of stocks in the port of Haiphong. With

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these logistics measures achieved, the intensity of resupply efforts would fall off. If the nature of combat in the South were changing sharply, some resupply measures such as the movement of heavy weapons and ammunition would continue. The supply requirement in this case would be relatively small and easily executed once stockpiles of other supplies had been built up.

14. Within a month the North Vietnamese would have completed temporary repairs to any bridges they chose on any lines of communication in the country. Additional bypasses to bridges, roads, and rail lines would also have been completed. The North Vietnamese would, for example, be able to restore thoroughly rail service on the heavily interdicted Hanoi-Vinh line.

15. Between six and twelve months after a bombing pause, the North Vietnamese would have installed additional bypass railroad bridges over such key crossings as the Red River at Hanoi and the Song Tram Boc at Haiphong. Permanent repairs on key roads and rail lines would have been completed and temporary alternate bridges and bypasses would be kept serviceable in case bombing resumed. If the pause were seen as permanent, great progress would have been made in restoring major damaged industrial facilities to operation. Even if the pause were of uncertain duration those industries most important to the war effort, such as the Haiphong cement plant, could be restored to operation within six months to one year.

16. Manpower pressures would be significantly reduced. If the North Vietnamese thought the bombing pause was permanent, the 500,000-600,000 personnel now tied up in repair, dispersal, and civil defense programs could return to their normal pursuits. Even if they felt the bombings would resume, they would at the end of a year be able to carry on any remaining repair programs, take measures to improve their security and reduce their vulnerability, and release at least one third of the labor force presently tied up by the bombings.

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17. Thus after a year North Vietnam's situation would be significantly improved. Because the bombing does not presently limit the flow of men and supplies to South Vietnam, its cessation will not automatically bring an increase in this flow. With the bombing interrupted, however, the infiltration and supply would be orderly, more easily managed, and less expensive to Hanoi--even if the ground war escalated in the South.

18. In one case, moreover, a cessation would have a direct and immediate effect on the military situation in the South. This would be in the DMZ. Without the ability to strike back at North Vietnamese positions north of the DMZ, the US Marines might quickly find such positions as Con Thien untenable. The abandonment of these positions would also have considerable impact on both sides at the negotiating table.

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